

The Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program: Legislative History and Outlook for Expansion

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Having Senior Citizens eat more fruits and vegetables. It seems so simple and so basic. Study after study has demonstrated that individuals who consume diets containing large amounts of fruits and vegetables may reduce their risk for developing age-related diseases, including Alzheimer's. USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services have for several years promoted the food pyramid, encouraging the consumption of fruits and vegetables. There is also the "Five-A-Day" campaign.

But despite all of these promotional efforts and common sense arguments, many people, including the elderly, do not get enough fruits and vegetables. Some do not get enough because of income limitations. Some do not get enough because they do not have access to grocery stores that offer a large variety. The Toledo Blade reported just within the past ten days that with the closing of grocery stores in downtown Toledo that it will be hard for people living in the central city without access to transportation

to get to a grocery store, including those people living in senior citizen's high rises.

At the same time, one of the fastest growing sectors of agriculture retailing has been the development of farmers markets. They have grown from a few hundred across the nation in the mid 1990s to nearly 4,000 today. Farmers Markets provide fresh, wholesome, locally produced products, and it allows both producer and consumer to get to know one another in a fashion that used to be the standard of business, not the novelty that it is today.

Congresswoman Kaptur has often argued that the nutrition side of USDA – the part of the Department that takes nearly 60% of USDA's entire budget – is not in sync with the production side of the Department. She repeatedly asks how can we get the nutritionists together with the producers to be sure that we have a consistent message and program that benefits all? In late 2000, recognizing the growing trend towards farmers markets and the need senior citizens had for fresh fruits and vegetables, the US

Department of Agriculture proposed a pilot program to provide vouchers to senior citizens to use to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at farmers markets and road side stands. The response to the idea was so great that even before the first grants were awarded, Secretary Glickman expanded the program from \$15 million to \$25 million. We were fortunate that the Northwest Ohio Area Office on Aging saw the value of this program early on and submitted a proposal. As a fortunate outcome, Ohio has been one of the top three states participating in this program since it began four years ago, claiming between eight and ten percent of the national funding for the program.

During 2001, we began working to change this pilot program into a regular part of USDA's operations. We succeeded in getting provisions added to the Farm Bill that made this program a regular annual program until the farm bill expires in 2007.

But with the budget limits being faced in the development of the Farm Bill, a program that started with \$25 million as a pilot was reduced to a flat annual amount of \$15 million for each year

between 2002 and 2007. And even with this limit, nearly every state submits an application each year for nearly twice as much money is available.

We know that for the current fiscal year, these grants are expected to serve over 800,000 low-income senior citizens nationwide, an increase from FY 2004. Coupons to purchase fresh produce this year will be accepted by over 13,000 farmers at nearly 4,000 markets, roadside stands or community-supported agriculture programs.

And we know from our own experiences in northwest Ohio that the participating seniors truly appreciate the program, with some saying that they are getting fresh fruits and vegetables that they otherwise would not be able to afford. Some seniors are canning some of their purchases for later in the year, wasting nothing. Participating farmers have told Congresswoman Kaptur that they enjoy dealing with these seniors who truly appreciate quality produce, and they look at the program as an important addition to their income. It is also amazing to note story after

story of producers throwing a little extra into the shopping bag because they want to help their neighbors in need.

Congresswoman Kaptur continues to believe that the Department can use other authorities to supplement funding for this program, but the Department continues to respond that its lawyers tell them the only way to get more money is to change the existing law authorizing the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program.

For this reason, Congresswoman Kaptur last year a bill to expand funding for the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, and has reintroduced her bill this year. HR 131 would increase the funding for this program from \$15 million to \$25 million this fiscal year, to \$50 million in fiscal 2006, and to \$75 million in fiscal 2007, the year that the Farm Bill is already scheduled to be renewed. She believes based on estimates done by the Congressional Budget Office that this level of funding would meet the likely demand for this program as it is expanded to new states as well as expanded within existing states.

Her bill would also allow up to ten percent of the funds provided for the program to be used for operating expenses. Right now there is no administrative funding support whatsoever from the federal government. While many groups have undertaken this program on their own, perhaps with other community or state support, she knows that such generosity cannot be continued. The ability to have strong sustainable programs is directly linked to our willingness to support their positive operation, so we need to consider administrative funding.

One final provision of her bill will give the Secretary of Agriculture the authority to expand the list of eligible items that can be purchased with these vouchers. Many senior citizens have said they would like to purchase eggs or honey at farmers markets, but the vouchers cannot currently be used for that purpose. She wants to allow the option following a reasonable review of the pros and cons of that potential expansion of the items eligible for purchase.

Congressman Jim Walsh, Republican from New York, is her lead cosponsor on this bill. We have worked together well for several years with both he and Congresswoman Kaptur having been members of the Agricultural Appropriations Subcommittee. However, due to committee realignment this year, he long serves on the subcommittee but has maintained his interest in and support for this program.

We currently have more than twenty cosponsors for this bill, and, with your support and that of others around the country, hope to increase that number so that we can get the House Agriculture Committee to begin serious consideration of it.

Let me also speak briefly about another bill that Congresswoman Kaptur has introduced – the Farmers Market Infrastructure Assistance Act, HR 710. As much as we support farmers' market activities, we need to support the markets themselves. Right now USDA does not have the authority to provide bricks and mortar money for the maintenance,

rehabilitation, and construction of farmers markets in communities larger than 50,000.

Congresswoman Kaptur's bill will provide USDA with the ability to provide grants of up to 25% of project costs and a combination of loans and grants up to 80% of project costs for farmers markets owned by governmental entities or nonprofit organizations where at least 50% of the sales space is reserved for products produced and sold by local farmers, ranchers, and associations of farmers and ranchers. This bill also has more than 20 cosponsors at this time.

In this day of big-box grocery stores where local products have virtually no ability to get shelf space, or where producers can't afford the slotting fees to get access to those shelves, support for locally produced products is important to truly maintain our family farm system. Producers have told us that a one-fourth cent price change in a dozen eggs is enough to change who gets the contract. Margins are already slim enough, so if we want to insure a continued availability of fresh, wholesome products, we

have to find ways to support local producers. Farmers Markets, roadside stands, purchases by school systems and senior meal providers from local farmers and ranchers all contribute to a healthier economy and a vital agriculture.

And in the end, consumers win with wholesome products at reasonable prices. It is all about connecting the nutrition side of the Department of Agriculture with the production side of the same Department to benefit consumers and producers alike.